

<https://helda.helsinki.fi>

---

## Introduction to the issue

Crane, Thera Marie

2019

---

Crane , T M 2019 , ' Introduction to the issue ' , Nordic Journal of African Studies , vol. 28 ,  
no. 3 .

---

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/310905>

---

cc\_by\_nc  
publishedVersion

---

*Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.*

*This is an electronic reprint of the original article.*

*This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.*

*Please cite the original version.*

# Introduction to the issue

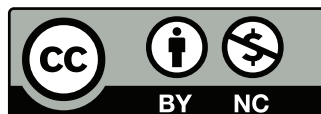
*Thera Marie Crane*  
*NJAS Subject Editor for Language Studies*  
*University of Helsinki, Finland*  
*thera.crane@helsinki.fi*

The UNESCO International Year of Indigenous Languages 2019 (IYIL) came to an end shortly before the publication of this issue of NJAS. According to UNESCO's Strategic Outcome Document for IYIL, over eight hundred IYIL events were held around the world in 2019. In Africa, these events ranged from a major regional gathering of the African Union Commission and African Academy of Languages (ACALAN) at the African Union Commission Headquarters in Addis-Ababa, to plans for the development of a reality TV game show in Nigeria entitled "Can You Really Speak Your Language?"

In November 2019, UNESCO released a document outlining key outcomes and conclusions of the IYIL (UNESCO 2019). Many of these are relevant to the work and mission of NJAS, and I will outline some of them here. UNESCO declares that multilingualism and linguistic diversity are essential components of development, peace, and human flourishing. Languages are key parts of their speakers' identities, and the right to speak one's own language(s) is recognized by UNESCO as a basic human right. However, current "sustainable development" practices are often orthogonal to the needs and goals of speakers of indigenous languages, and they may even be exclusionary of these speakers. Therefore, indigenous language speakers (and especially women and youth) must be involved in development as agents and directors, rather than merely as recipients or targets of such efforts. Recognizing the ubiquity of language in human lives and societies, the document concludes:

Considering that language, as a cross-cutting issue, embraces and transcends all spheres of life, it is crucial to guarantee a free and varied flow of information, conveyed in indigenous languages in accordance with ethical standards, across a wide range of disciplines and domains, thereby generating new knowledge, enhancing distribution and ensuring the broadest accessibility of dedicated resources for indigenous language users. (UNESCO 2019 Annex:7–8)

One major outcome of the IYIL is the UN's commitment to an International *Decade* of Indigenous Languages, to commence on 1 January 2022. This broadening is reflective of two key characteristics of indigenous languages: first, their importance – a year does not suffice to rec-



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

ognize and understand the role they play – and second, the vast amount of work that remains to be done in securing their status and making speakers' rights a reality. In Africa, for example, Hammarström (2020) estimates that of 2183 languages, 518 – approximately one quarter – do not have any documentation beyond (at the most) a basic word list. This statistic does not measure the vitality of languages, since even a language totally undocumented by linguists may have a vibrant speaker community, but it does indicate that, if UNESCO goals are to be taken seriously, governments and scientific communities have much work to do in collaboration with indigenous language communities in Africa.

Another key conclusion drawn from IYIL, as outlined above, is the necessary centrality of indigenous language speakers themselves in making decisions and carrying out work related to their languages. This conclusion may seem obvious, but for much of the history of the field, publications on African linguistics were attributed almost entirely to non-native-speaker authors, and the inevitable deep involvement of amateur native speaker linguists was frequently uncredited or elided. The contents similarly reflected outsider interests, priorities, and, at times, prejudices, and they were often restricted to theoretical and descriptive topics. In more recent decades, however, the number of African and native-speaker linguists has swelled, and the focus of the field has broadened accordingly (see also Childs 2003: 1–18).

From the inception of the *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, a significant percentage of its contributions have come from African authors, and recent years have seen an increase in these numbers. One of the many benefits of African authorship is that some of the language- and linguistics-themed articles are written by native speakers of the languages under discussion, with accordingly deep, insider understandings of linguistic nuances and of the cultures within which the languages are embedded. Through these articles (as through all our language articles) NJAS is able to make freely available important data from previously un(der)described languages, leading to better resources for meaningful typological research, further developments in linguistic theory, and – perhaps most importantly – snapshots of the beauty and uniqueness of each language (see also Hyman 2003). Of course, language-based contributions to NJAS are not “merely” descriptive, even if an artificial line could be drawn between the mutually dependent pursuits of language description and linguistic theory. They advance theoretical approaches from across the linguistic sub-fields.

NJAS is also a logical venue for collaborative works between Africa- and Nordic-based researchers, and we have published numerous articles with African and Nordic co-authorship over our nearly 30-year tenure. Such cross-continental collaborations and the combinations of expertise they afford make the journal's output of even greater international relevance.

One focus area that has gained ground along with the increase in African authors is language policy. This topic is also of importance to Nordic-based linguists, both in relation to African studies and in the context of developing feasible and just language policies in northern Europe's increasingly plurilingual contexts. Many NJAS contributions grapple with hard practical problems related to the position of indigenous languages in local and national language policies, both as these policies appear officially and as they are implemented in practice. As outlined in UNESCO's IYIL conclusions, appropriate policies and institutional support can be critical in the promotion of linguistic human rights, and, as a result, of human rights in general (UNESCO 2019). However, the development and implementation of good policy is not easy, and we are therefore glad to publish papers with new insights and arguments to further the debate on best practices within particular linguistic environments, as well as papers that propose creative solutions to practical problems in policy implementation.

In recognition of the close of the IYIL – and of the coming decade of indigenous languag-

es – we have dedicated this issue of NJAS entirely to language-themed papers. In this volume, **Onyumbé & Koni Muluwa** take a historical approach to the phonology of Cíbinjì cyà Ngúsú, a Bantu language of DRC, highlighting some of the less common Bantu sound changes observed in this language. **Sonkoué Kamdem** presents new data on the previously undescribed tense-aspect system of Mengaka, a Grassfields language spoken in Cameroon, providing a beautiful illustration of the complexity inherent in even a “basic” description of the tense-aspect system of many African languages: Although Sonkoué Kamdem restricts her description to affirmative main clause contexts, and aims to describe chiefly the primary (temporal semantic) functions of the markers, the distinctions shown are numerous, with hints of even greater complexity if pragmatic functions are considered. **Fongang** presents new data and a morphosyntactic analysis of the *na* focus particle in Cameroon Pidgin English (also known as Kamtok and Cameroon Creole English), drawing connections to similar phenomena in other pidgin and creole languages. Like Cameroon Pidgin English, African creoles and many contact varieties are well-developed, full-fledged languages with intricate grammatical systems, and they often have huge numbers of first- and second-language speakers (see e.g. Yapko 2016; Sande 2015). Therefore, they merit the same quality and scope of linguistic research as other indigenous languages, even if their so-called “lexifying” languages, from which much of the vocabulary is derived, did not originate on the African continent. Finally, **Dione** offers Lexical-Functional Grammar analyses of prominent linguistic features in Wolof, a Niger-Congo language that is spoken mostly in Senegal, Gambia, and Mauritania. Dione’s analysis is implemented through a digital grammar development platform (Xerox Linguistic Environment) and is carried out as part of ParGram, a comparative grammar project that aims “to produce deep, linguistically well-motivated, and maximally parallelized grammars for a variety of languages” (Dione, this volume, p. 3). UNESCO (2019) recognizes the importance of developing quality digital resources for indigenous languages in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and computational approaches to grammatical description such as the one presented by Dione form an important part of this digitalization work.

As noted in the introduction to the first issue of NJAS in the International Year of Indigenous Languages (Crane & Schneidermann 2019), NJAS is active in promoting African languages this year, and always. We are grateful to our funders, our contributors, our many generous reviewers, and our readership for making this possible, and for allowing us to maintain our free, fully open-access model.

## REFERENCES

**Childs, George Tucker. 2003.**

*An introduction to African languages.* Amsterdam / Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

**Crane, Thera Marie & Schneidermann, Nanna. 2019.**

“NJAS Celebrates the International Year of Indigenous Languages” *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 28 (1).

**Hammarström, Harald. 2020.**

“The state of description of the languages of the World: Manual and automated measurements.” Langnet guest lecture, University of Helsinki, 15 January 2020.

**Hyman, Larry M. 2003.**

“Why describe African languages?” Keynote address at the 4<sup>th</sup> World Congress of African Linguistics / 34<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference on African Linguistics, Rutgers University, 18 June 2003.

**Sande, Hannah. 2015.**

“Nouchi as a distinct language”. In: *Proceedings of the 44th Annual Conference on African Linguistics*, Ruth Kramer, Elizabeth C. Zsiga, and One Tlale Boyer (eds.), pp. 243–253. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project.

**United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). 2019.**

“Strategic Outcome Document of the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages.” (Document 40 C/68). 15 November 2019.

<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000371494/PDF/371494eng.pdf.multi.page=1>

**Yakpo, Kofi. 2016.**

“‘The only language we speak really well’: the English creoles of Equatorial Guinea and West Africa at the intersection of language ideologies and language policies.” *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 2016(239). 211–233.